

Uniformed and Overseas Citizen Absentee Voting Act:  
An Analysis of Minnesota Elections Administration

**MPP Capstone Paper**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Public Policy or Master of Public Affairs  
Degree Requirements  
The Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs  
The University of Minnesota

Jennifer Nelson  
Jason Buck  
J. David Fenley

Date of Oral Presentation  
May 15, 2014

## **Executive Summary**

Due to the additional challenges that face U.S. citizens seeking to exercise their right to vote while either serving in the military or living overseas, it is crucial that the process be examined to ensure that the manner of its facilitation is addressing as many of those barriers as possible. This study initially sought out to look at the state of Minnesota and examine the manner in which at a county level they collect, track, and report the data needed to evaluate this process. To do this, 11 counties were selected for individual interviews with elections officials, of which 9 ultimately ended up participating. The information gleaned from these interviews was then used to assess the overall status of the facilitation of military and overseas voting (also known as UOCAVA) in the state of Minnesota, what is working well, what could use improvement, and what items should be studied further.

Although the initial research proposal intended to focus solely on the data collection process, as the interviews progressed it became clear that elections themselves are a vast ecosystem with many moving parts on the local, state, and federal levels. All of these items interact with each other and determine the greater health of the system that provides the support structure for the UOCAVA process. Subsequently, any assessment of the UOCAVA reporting would also need to examine the system, personnel, and technology surrounding the collection of this data.

Based on this examination, we find that the following recommendations will further improve the UOCAVA voting experience:

- Maintain a strong centralized state system for reporting that is accessible by county elections administrators.
- Consider elections administration a customer service experience that focuses on both personal and technical skills.
- Adjust UOCAVA reporting systems to allow for the reporting of multiple rejection reasons for a single ballot.
- Further diversify training options through regional partnerships.
- Leverage and expand existing networks for information sharing between counties
- Further study options for electronic ballot return.
- Conduct interstate comparisons to assess best practices nationwide.

Addressing these matters and continuing to evaluate the procedures surrounding UOCAVA voting will ensure that the data being collected is strong. Perhaps more importantly, it will also ensure that this data can be used in such a way as to reduce remaining barriers to the process. Voting is the cornerstone of democracy and the accessibility of the process is essential.

## **Introduction**

Election administration is a complex process that involves coordination and delegation between federal, state, and local actors. Federal guidelines, while important in protecting every citizen's right to vote, add to that complexity. In order to ensure that the system established by The Uniformed and Overseas Citizen Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) is achieving its purpose of improving the voting process for citizens who are overseas or serving in the military, accurate data collection and transmission about the process is crucial. Therefore, it is important to assess the state of that current process. This research examines the state of Minnesota and the role that it plays in facilitating the voting process for UOCAVA citizens as indicated by interviewing officials charged with administering and overseeing the process at both the state and county level.

However, as the research was being conducted, it quickly became clear that to simply assess the process of data collection would not be enough to determine the full health of UOCAVA administration without also examining the constructs and procedures of the system, personnel, and technology surrounding the collection of this data. In this way, elections are much like an ecosystem. Even when there is a specific area whose health you are trying to ascertain, you find that other connected items, which at first seem minor, have a role to play in supporting it. This is true of UOCAVA voting. Although it is a small sliver of election administration dealing with a minority of voters (Appendix A), its success depends on the strength of election administration procedures and practices at both the local and state level. Therefore this report examines not only the methods of processing UOCAVA ballots and their associated data collection/reporting, but

also the overall structure of the state system, individual county structures, and current training procedures,

## **Background & Overview**

The statutory structures in place that have created the framework surrounding the voting process and guidelines for military and overseas voters are largely found in three major pieces of federal elections reform legislation. In addition there are state statutes and guidelines surrounding the process.

### UOCAVA

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizen Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) was signed into law by Ronald Reagan on August 28, 1986. UOCAVA requires that states and territories allow members of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps, the Merchant Marine, their families, and United States citizens residing outside the United States; to register and vote absentee in elections for Federal offices. As well, most states and territories have their own laws allowing citizens covered under UOCAVA to register and vote absentee in state and local elections.

The Act provides for an application called the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) where qualified voters can request an absentee ballot. The completed FPCA is then submitted to the applicant's local election official. The local election official reviews and verifies the submitted FPCA and sends the applicant an absentee ballot. The applicant then receives an absentee ballot

and mails it to the local election official to be counted. If applicants have not received an absentee ballot 30 days before the election, there is a provision that they may submit the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) to ensure their vote is received in time to be counted.<sup>1 2</sup>

### HAVA

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was signed into law on October 29, 2002 by President George W. Bush. HAVA was passed to help minimize problems that arose in the 2000 U.S. Presidential election. The law ensured that punch card voting systems be phased out, that an Election Assistance Commission is created to assist with the administration of Federal elections, and to establish minimum election administration standards. This act superficially affects UOCAVA voters in that it mandates that the Secretary of Defense implements measures a postmark or proof of mailing date is included on each absentee ballot collected overseas, that military families have easy access to voting information, that each state receiving UOCAVA ballots have a centralized office for providing information to these voters, and that each state inform UOCAVA voters why if applicable, their application for registration was rejected.<sup>3</sup>

### MOVE Act

The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (MOVE) was signed into law on October 28, 2009 by President Barack Obama. The MOVE Act requires states to transmit validly

---

<sup>1</sup> The United States Department of Justice. *The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens and Absentee Voting Act*. Accessed May 10, 2014. [http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/misc/activ\\_uoc.php](http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/misc/activ_uoc.php)

<sup>2</sup> Federal Voting Assistance Program. *UOCAVA Voting Process*. Accessed May 10, 2014. <http://www.fvap.gov/vao/overview>

<sup>3</sup> Federal Voting Assistance Program. *Interpretation of the Help America Vote Act of 2002*. August, 2003. Accessed May 10, 2014. <http://www.fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Policies/havamemo.pdf>

requested absentee ballots to UOCAVA voters no later than 45 days before a federal election when the request has been received by that date.<sup>4</sup>

### UOCAVA in Minnesota

Minnesota has long had a reputation for excellence in elections administrations. It is a state that takes pride in consistently exceeding the national average in voter turnout. In the last two presidential elections (2012 and 2008), it was ranked within the top three on The Pew Charitable Trusts' Elections Performance Index.<sup>5</sup>

Guidelines when it comes to Minnesota's UOCAVA voters are contained in Minnesota Statutes 203B.16 to 203B.27, which were written in order to be in compliance with United States Code, title 42, section 1973ff. During the 2014 Legislative session, the state further amended these guidelines to allow for UOCAVA absentee ballots to be requested via a secure website maintained by the office of the secretary of state.<sup>6</sup> This was done to further ease the process for these voters and in recognition of the fact that in this day and age when people are so far from home, the internet is often their most accessible and fastest source of information and communication.

Elections vary greatly from state to state, with each having different methods of overseeing them.

While local administration remains the work of individual counties, Minnesota has taken the

---

<sup>4</sup> The United States Department of Justice. *Fact Sheet: MOVE Act*. October 27, 2010. Accessed May 10, 2014. <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/October/10-crt-1212.html>

<sup>5</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts. *Elections Performance Index*. April 8, 2014. Accessed April 25, 2014. [http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/Flash\\_Library/PCS/Interactives/ElectionsPerformanceIndex/template.html#indicator](http://www.pewstates.org/uploadedFiles/Flash_Library/PCS/Interactives/ElectionsPerformanceIndex/template.html#indicator)

<sup>6</sup> Minnesota Statute § 203B.17 (2014). Accessed May 1, 2014. <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/?id=185&year=2014&type=0#laws.0.10.0>

approach of centralizing the technology and reporting required in the process. The systems and formats counties use for election data are defined by the state. Due to this, perhaps the most essential state legislation that has helped with the facilitation of meeting the UOCAVA requirements isn't one that directly speaks of UOCAVA at all. Rather, it is their Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) that has become a key tool to implementation and uniform reporting within the UOCAVA process.

SVRS was established following a legislative mandate in 1987.<sup>7</sup> This law required the state to establish and maintain a central database for all voter registration information. It also required that they create the system in such a way that county auditors would have access and be able to enter voter information directly into the system, as well as provide for procedures that would convert all existing computerized records into the centralized system. This statute was updated further in 2004, in order to bring Minnesota into full compliance with HAVA. At that time language was added that would require that the system to provide reports on the number of absentee ballots transmitted, returned, and cast by UOCAVA voters.<sup>8</sup> The Office of the Secretary of State is charged with maintaining, administering, and creating state rules for SVRS.

This system continues to be the hub of Minnesota's electoral activity. All 87 counties use it for voter registration and absentee ballots. Recently, the Legislature also mandated that it be used to track the mail balloting process in Minnesota for those precincts small enough to qualify to use this method. (This update to SVRS is currently in progress.) This system has been changed and

---

<sup>7</sup> Minnesota Statute §§ 201.021-2 (1987). Accessed May 1, 2014.  
<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/?doctype=Chapter&year=1987&type=0&id=361>

<sup>8</sup> Minnesota Statute § 201.022 (2004). Accessed May 1, 2014.  
<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/laws/?doctype=Chapter&year=2004&type=0&id=293>



upgraded as technology has changed over the years. The system currently in place is the third iteration, created in 2004. Although outside contractors were enlisted to help with its initial programming, the maintenance and enhancement of this tool is now handled entirely by the state. There is a team of programmers in the state elections department that work solely with SVRS. They also take calls from county officials to assist with troubleshooting and repairing issues that may arise. Additionally there are department IT staff that handle the structural side of the technology. They are housed in an office that contains the servers for the system and primarily handle the hardware associated with it. Issues dealing with connectivity and bandwidth are deferred to the state government IT staff, commonly known as MN IT.

The Minnesota Office of the Secretary of State introduced a portal on their website in September of 2013 for UOCAVA voters to sign up and request ballots online. Even though it was an off election year, around 1300 voters requested their ballot through this new option. The state office has continued to see steady use of this option in the first few months of 2014 and anticipates that this will continue as more and more overseas voters are turning to the internet as their main source of information.

When examining Minnesota's experience with SVRS and UOCAVA ballots, it should also be mentioned that Minnesota was one of five states that was awarded a \$2 million competitive grant from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission in 2008. The purpose of this grant was to allow for the improvement and enhancement of the state's election data collection system. The state's logic model for this grant can be found in Appendix B. This award came with the expectation that the state would use this money to improve their data collection processes, develop and

document best data collection processes, enhance their capacity to collect accurate and complete data, and document their procedures. This included improvements for tracking and collecting UOCAVA data. In Minnesota, this was done through improvements to the centralized statewide system. This grant was a natural fit for Minnesota, because they had already had an election data collection system development blueprint in place since 2003. It was during this grant period that Minnesota built and implemented a module for managing UOCAVA records and automatically generating statistics required for federal reporting.<sup>9</sup>

## **Methodology**

For this research we interviewed local elections administrators in each of the counties that agreed to participate. These interviews were conducted via in-person site visits, by telephone, and through email. A uniform list of questions concerning the UOCAVA voting process was created and used for each interview conducted, although additional unlisted follow-up questions were asked if a response indicated additional areas that needed to be explored. As well, in-person interviews were conducted with Minnesota's state election officials using a modified list of UOCAVA voting process questions. From the interviews conducted, the data has been analyzed and a report written recommending the best practices for each step of the UOCAVA voting process.

Minnesota counties to evaluate were selected based on geographic diversity, population, urban/rural classification, and UOCAVA ballot rejection and return rate data (Appendix A).

Based on these criteria, the following counties were asked to participate:

---

<sup>9</sup> US Election Assistance Commission. *2008 Election Data Collection Grant Program Evaluation Report*. June 30, 2009. Accessed April 25, 2014. <http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Page/2008%20Election%20Data%20Collection%20Grant%20Program%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf>

- Hennepin County
  - Large urban
  - Large Central Metro Area
  - Population 1,185,000
  
- Ramsey County
  - Large urban
  - Large Central Metro Area
  - Population 520,152
  
- Anoka County
  - Large suburban and exurban
  - Large Fringe Metro Area
  - Population 336,414
  
- Washington County
  - Large suburban and exurban
  - Large Fringe Metro Area
  - Population 244,088
  
- St. Louis County
  - Urban/Rural
  - Medium Metro Area
  - Northeastern Minnesota
  - Population 200,319
  
- Olmsted County
  - Urban/Rural
  - Small Metro Area
  - Southeastern Minnesota
  - Population 147,066
  
- Clay County
  - Urban/Rural
  - Small Metro Area
  - Northwestern Minnesota
  - Population 60,155

- Lyon County
  - Rural
  - Micropolitan Area
  - Southwestern Minnesota
  - Population 25,543
  
- Blue Earth County
  - Rural
  - Micropolitan Area
  - South Central Minnesota
  - Population 65,091
  
- Stevens County
  - Rural,
  - Non-Core Area
  - West Central Minnesota
  - Population 9,663
  
- Marshall County
  - Rural
  - Non-Core Area
  - Northwestern Minnesota
  - Population 9,449

From these eleven counties, Blue Earth County did not respond to requests for an interview, while Washington County initially agreed to participate but did not return their questionnaire by the deadline for inclusion in the study. A map of these counties is found in Appendix C. From the nine participating counties, three in person interviews were conducted with the counties of Anoka, Hennepin, and Stevens. Phone Interviews were conducted with Lyon and St. Louis counties; Email interviews were carried out with Clay, Marshall, Olmstead, and Ramsey counties.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> United States Census Bureau. *State and County Quick Facts*. March 27, 2014. Accessed May 10, 2014. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27000.html>

The standard list of questions asked when interviewing county officials have been included in Appendix D. The questions asked of the state elections director are found in Appendix E.

## **Findings**

### Elections Department Structures

Of the counties surveyed, only the population centers in the Twin Cities (Ramsey and Hennepin counties) and surrounding suburban (Anoka county) areas have dedicated staff to elections administration. This means that rural county elections staff are generally housed under wider county departments. Most often, they are found in the office of county auditor or auditor-treasurer. However, in Olmsted County it is housed within Property Records and Licensing. These types of arrangements require that staff perform other duties when elections are not taking place, or more importantly, in many cases indicate that elections may not be their primary job duty at all, but rather a seasonal responsibility that is secondary to their main role in the county. This means that when election season rolls around often the staff regular duties are expected to be completed along with the election administration. This can lead to a large workload and long hours, especially during even year elections.

Examples of this were prevalent throughout our conversations across the state. In Stevens County, a small predominantly agricultural county in the west central portion of the state, elections administration is housed under the office of county auditor/treasurer. Here, an official told us that in addition to being in charge of administering elections, she also handles accounts payable for the entire county. In Lyon County, a mostly rural area in the south western portion of

the state, elections administration is also located within the Treasure/Auditor department. In this department, three accountants by trade and one administrator handle the administration of elections. In Marshall County, a rural area of far northwestern Minnesota, the election administrator shared that her official duties include election administrator, board secretary, capital asset manager, backup for the department of motor vehicles, and aggregate reporter, as well as others that she did not list. Every county that we contacted in Minnesota has either part time employees or brings in temporary help during even year elections, although the amount of temporary help needed varies based on size.

### Training

In terms of training staff and employees, all counties utilize the Secretary of State's training materials. In addition, prior to every even year election, the Secretary of State's office conducts training for all county elections administration officials throughout the state. In order to try to meet diverse needs within training, the state uses a number of methods. When SVRS was first introduced, state officials traveled to various regions around the state to help train counties on the new system. Since then they have used a mixture of in person events, online resources, and in system instructional modules (including downloadable PDFs that can be printed). They also utilize Adobe Captivate training software. This allows them to present screen caps of the actual system and walk users directly through the process of using the system. Cisco's WebEx, a web based online training center has also become an important piece of the state's training tool belt. It is an online collaborative environment that allows for interactive web based training that includes video components. The state tapes and stores these videos as a link so that county officials who were unable to participate in the live training can view them later at their

convenience, or that those who attended training can further share them with others in their office. During our research, it quickly became apparent that the state is dedicated to providing as many resources as possible for counties to access when needed. Each county we spoke to also has evolved their own training materials for specific issues and procedures to supplement the state's centralized training. All reported that there is specialized UOCAVA training. However, state officials confirmed that there are challenges for small counties that do not see UOCAVA ballots as often as those with larger populations. The infrequency of their contact with these ballots may lead to unfamiliarity with the process of handling them. As the Director of Elections for the State of Minnesota stated, "The challenge is to get them [small counties] to recognize there's something special about this one and that they need to treat it as a military overseas ballot."

#### System Technology and Centralization

Multiple election administrators expressed to us that the 2008 Franken/Coleman recount was the best thing to happen to the elections process. It forced the state to take a hard look at elections and determine discrepancies. As stated by a top Anoka County election official, the recall was "one of the best things that ever happened to Minnesota elections because we saw where all the holes were." It also created opportunities for policy makers to more closely examine the electoral process and dedicate funds to its improvement.

Currently, the majority of Minnesota's election reporting and tracking processes are centralized and determined at a state level, while their administration continues to occur at a local level. SVRS is the key component of this centralization. As previously mentioned SVRS was first

implemented for the 1988 election and is required to be used by every county in the state.

Besides a slight learning curve, each county is pleased with the ability of SVRS to simplify their election administration. Specifically, the UOCAVA process is well regarded in every county surveyed. Short of a few minor recommendations, the UOCAVA process from voter registration and ballot request, to ballot generation and delivery, to UOCAVA ballot counting is seamless.

The process incorporates barcodes associated with each UOCAVA ballot. These barcodes appear not only on the ballots themselves, but on any report on which that ballot is listed. This means that ballots can be tracked and received simply by using a wand to scan the barcode and update the status of the ballot in SVRS. It also means that anytime the ballot's status is changed, the change is associated with a specific SVRS user ID, so the system tracks not only the progress of the UOCAVA ballot, but who is handling it.

State officials also praised the benefits of this centralization. When compared to states that allow counties to continue to use their own reporting systems, and merely dump that data into the state system, Minnesota's process ensures uniformity and by allowing county officials to directly scan the barcodes generated on all absentee ballots, there is no need to transform data or put it through multiple steps in order to make it usable for the state's federal reports. This reduces potential for error. It also makes reports easy to access and generate. When data on UOCAVA ballots from the 2012 election was requested from the state, a full report for every county including ballot submission, return, and rejection rates, as well as all reasons for rejection was generated and presented to us in less than five minutes.



Some counties use other methods to track data that SVRS cannot. Ramsey County maintains separate spreadsheets for this information. Meanwhile, Anoka County commissioned a custom built web based elections management technology that allows them to track things such as workers, polling places, and equipment. Others use web applications and database tools to manage election logistics, such as election judge training and scheduling. It is important to note that this additional information does not contain any information that is required for federal UOCAVA reporting. Rather, these systems were developed to track information that is essential to the efficient administration of the voting process, yet outside of the scope of SVRS.

Because Minnesota uses optical scanners to read their paper ballots, many UOCAVA ballots must be reproduced on ballots that are able to be fed through ballot counters in each county. Once the ballot is reproduced the original is destroyed and the new ballot is mixed in with the rest of the county's non-UOCAVA ballots. The technology used to count ballots is not the same in every county we surveyed. Different counties use different technologies but this is unaffected by SVRS and UOCAVA because once the ballot is reproduced it is no different from every other ballot and UOCAVA has served its purpose. After the ballots are counted the results are uploaded so the Secretary of State can tally the votes.

#### Customer Service and Information Sharing

We found that each county takes a hands-on approach to UOCAVA voters. Election administrators realize that extra staff time is necessary to process UOCAVA requests and then ensure that ballots are received and counted. Sometimes this requires multiple emails and phone

calls with voters and their family to make sure that UOCAVA voters are able to participate in elections. Most officials viewed this customer service role as a crucial part of their job.

Officials generally agreed that information sharing among counties is a good thing. There is a formal work group process with the state to share ideas but some counties, mainly rural, stated that this process was either difficult to engage in due to geography, or it did not produce results that benefited them. Alternatively urban and suburban counties stated that some ideas from this process were implemented. However, these work groups seem to exist primarily when the state is making major changes to SVRS and don't always meet on a regular basis.

Concerns with information sharing processes lie not only with their existence, but also with their accessibility. Rural counties that were further from St. Paul expressed financial constraints to participating in the State's working groups. Elections are often not a major funding priority in counties, when funding levels are set by county commissions that are more predominantly concerned with matters such as roads and property taxes. Some rural counties shared that they experienced difficulties in securing funding for elections equipment improvements or getting county commissioners interested in learning about the nuts and bolts of their election administration process. Given the financial constraints this creates for the essential duties of their job, it is highly unlikely they would have an easy time securing and dedicating funds to the transportation and lodging costs that participation in these groups would require.

## **Recommendations**

Throughout the course of these interviews, it quickly became apparent that county election administrators in the state of Minnesota have a high level of satisfaction with the current UOCAVA process and the technology that has been built here in order to help it run smoothly. In these matters efforts should be made to maintain the process. These should also be looked to by other states as an example of best practices. However, this isn't to say that they are no points of dissatisfaction or items that they wish could change.

In addition to recommending some items remain in place, we identified a number of areas that if addressed would further build the integrity and strength of the program. Most of these suggested changes deal not directly with the process of reporting on UOCAVA, but rather with the structures, information, and personnel charged with the administration and reporting of these ballots. It's important to remember that the reason reporting is critical to UOCAVA is that it helps to identify any barriers or shortfalls in the voting for military and overseas citizens seeking to exercise their right to vote. The potential changes identified seek to strengthen the structures surrounding this process, thus reducing the potential need to reject UOCAVA ballots while also ensuring the election officials recognize and treat these ballots with the respect and care that they deserve.

### **Maintain System Centralization**

The highly centralized and uniform procedural management of SVRS is a great benefit to UOCAVA and all election administration in Minnesota. At the same time, counties are allowed to supplement this centralized process with technology and procedures that are unique to each

county and the administrators and staff they serve. That is, the rigidity of SVRS does not constrain individualized procedures from evolving in parts of Minnesota that are geographically and demographically different. Like the United States, Minnesota is diverse; therefore it is good to allow some flexibility in the implementation of elections, but this flexibility must not be at the loss of efficiency and customer service. In fact, flexibility and decentralization should increase efficiency and customer service. It should also increase morale among election administrators. Rigid systems should never hinder the ability of staff to complete their tasks and we have found that with SVRS this is not the case.

SVRS has a portal in which users may create work tickets that either addresses a system malfunction. The initial response time to the request is short. The issue is acknowledged in a matter of hours. Fixing takes longer and depends on the depth of the problem or relevance of the suggested change. However, all counties indicated that when they did face a problem, the state was responsive and easy to communicate with. This speaks to the benefit of having programming staff housed directly within the state elections department.

#### Continue to Focus on Elections as a Form of Customer Service

A county official told us that UOCAVA administrators must have both technology and people skills. These are not traits that many jobs require both of. Many of the administrators we spoke with were excited to tell us stories of distant overseas voters who were happy to hear their vote had counted. There were stories of last second ballots, trips to the airport to make the last US Mail pickup, and tracking down voters in jungles in countries where mail delivery was in

disarray. What we found in talking with every administrator is pride in providing a service to voters that, to the voter, seemed above and beyond what was to be expected.

#### Adjust UOCAVA Reporting Options to Allow for Multiple Ballot Rejection Reasons

The only item that came up in terms of actual UOCAVA data reporting that could use some adjusting is in the area of reporting reasons for ballot rejection. Currently, the system only allows for a single reason for rejection (missing signature, late arrival, etc.) to be listed for each rejected ballot. However, when talking to state officials, they expressed that counties often receive absentee ballots that could have been rejected for multiple reasons. Because the system only accepts a single reason, that state has instructed them to simply mark the first reason they note. However, since the purpose of UOCAVA reporting is to help identify and address issues that may be occurring, all rejection reasons should be noted in order to identify the prevalence with which such situations are occurring.

#### Review Ballot Language and Instructions for Clarification

A few counties mentioned to us that even when there aren't issues with the manner in which UOCAVA voters access the process to request and receive their ballots, they encounter confusion on how the voter identifies themselves in order to obtain the correct ballot. They mentioned receiving many questions from voters who received a federal only ballot when they expected to get a full ballot that included state and local races. Hennepin County identified this as one of the most common questions they receive from their UOCAVA voters. When voters unknowingly request the wrong ballot (often through providing a current rather than permanent address), or need to call the county with multiple questions, this uses resources that could be

dedicated elsewhere. It also sometimes means that a ballot needs to be sent again, which can delay the voter from exercising his/her right to vote in a timely manner. A review of ballot language and instructions provided to these voters may help to remedy some of this confusion and make the entire process more user-friendly.

#### Further Diversify Training Options Through Regional Partnerships

The state has made great strides to create training materials multiple formats that are accessible to county officials. All counties we spoke to also mentioned created their own training materials for matters specific to their county in addition to the state provided materials. However, challenges remain in training largely due to the differences in county size, selection process for election administrators, combined years of workers' experience, and geographic proximity to the state office.

The manner in which someone becomes a head election official in Minnesota, varies by county. In larger counties that have an entire department dedicated to elections, these officials are hired specifically to run elections. This is true for Hennepin, Ramsey, Anoka, and St. Louis counties. In the remainder of counties we spoke to, the majority of head elections officials were elected. This adds an extra challenge, because since the role of running elections is often nestled under the roles assigned to the county auditor/treasurer, this means that they were likely elected primarily on their ability to oversee the county's finances. Apart from running their own campaign and voting themselves, they may have no previous experience in elections. This may be part of the reason levels of experience varied greatly from county to county. Some had people with more than a decade of experience who have worked with these ballots and the SVRS system

throughout its inception and following adjustments, while others had experienced a large amount of recent turnover. One small county even informed us that at this point not a single person had ever had to work with a UOCAVA ballot. The rarity of these ballots in small counties, combined with a lack of experience makes training even more essential. Although the state's mandatory training prior to every even year election is crucial, the timing can be problematic when these newly elected county officials take over their position prior to an odd year election. Without solid, county level training structures and materials in place, these officials may find themselves scrambling to get a grasp on their required job duties.

One county we spoke to had this experience. They found that outside of an even year election year, it was much harder to secure direct SVRS training. They said it felt like they practically "had to beg." Yet, even in this county, officials reported that once they had access to training, it was extremely helpful. All stated that speaking to the state secretary of state's office was helpful and that they enjoyed the online resources that guide them in using SVRS. Obviously, the state office has a wide variety of job duties to cover and it likely isn't feasible for them to offer direct training to any county that requests it when they have to see 87 counties. But that doesn't mean there aren't other options to provide better guidance and direct training. One alternative that Minnesota and other states should look into is establishing partnership agreements between counties of similar size within the same geographic region of the state. This would provide them a contact person with more experience that could provide them with additional guidance and training.

This could also help address some of the challenges presented from the geographic distance from the state office. One county we spoke to is nearly 330 miles away from the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State. Even if they wanted to send someone down for additional training that isn't mandatory, there are significant financial and time barriers. The drive itself would be around 10.5 hours round trip and the county would have to pay for travel and lodging expenses. In addition, they would have to schedule this at a time when the person they wanted to send to training could take some time away from his/her other county duties. Having a local contact from a nearby county who is familiar with the system could provide an important resource that could assist in this training during odd years.

Larger counties with staff dedicated solely to elections have a greater capacity to develop their own specific training materials. In smaller counties, where staff must share their duties with a number of other issues in the state, this may not be as easy. The individual approach to these local materials may also mean that similar counties are duplicating work. If they had better opportunities to share their findings and locally specific training materials, they may also find the resources they are seeking have already been developed, thus saving them staff time and resources.

#### Leverage and Expand Current Networks and Opportunities for County Information Sharing

Minnesota already has structures in place that may be able to facilitate the type of formal and informal information sharing that would benefit the administration of elections among individual counties. Throughout the course of our interviews, many counties mentioned the Minnesota



Association of County Officers (MACO) as an important organization in connecting counties to one another.

MACO is a professional association for county officials. It is an organization that was started in 1960 whose membership currently consists of county auditors, auditor-treasurers, treasurers, and recorders from every county in Minnesota. It is divided into nine regional districts in Minnesota. They seek to assist their members in improving the services they offer. In doing so, they utilize a number of committees on various topics. They also have a section where counties can share policies and procedures online. If this information sharing section could be expanded to include election administration training, procedure, and policy resources, which could be a great help to outstate county officials. This would be better in many ways than having the state try to fill the role, since MACO already has the structures and connections in place to connect people and ideas. When workgroups under the current administration in the Minnesota Office of the Secretary of State were established, MACO played a crucial role in soliciting participants. This is encouraging and suggests a willingness for them to work with state officials moving forward.

### **Items in Need of Further Study**

#### **Electronic Ballot Return**

From our interviews, a common theme arose; make all aspects of the voting process easier for UOCAVA voters. UOCAVA, and subsequently HAVA and the MOVE Act, have made voting more streamlined for service members overseas, but there is room for improvement. While a majority of the UOCAVA voting process can be administered online, the actual act of voting

must still be done via paper ballot and returned to the voter's local election office through the Postal Service or similar. To help improve the experience of UOCAVA voters, allowing UOCAVA voters to submit ballots via email should be studied. Allowing for electronic ballot return can ensure that a UOCAVA voter would be able to get their vote to their local election office in a timely manner.

There are bound to be many obstacles in allowing electronic ballot return to become law; including political opposition, technical challenges, and security concerns. A task force should be formed to study electronic ballot return, the best way to implement it within the framework of UOCAVA, and the structural technology requirements that states would need to have in place in order to administer it effectively. With the advent of the ability of UOCAVA voters to request their ballots via online portals, and the increasing prevalence of the use of online tools to take care of daily tasks, as well as major methods of communication, many elections administrators we spoke to mentioned that these voters are increasingly not only using the online absentee ballot request method available in Minnesota, but expecting to be able to return their ballots via email as well. When asked about the main reasons for ballot rejection, counties consistently mentioned ballots that are received late. Although there are likely many reasons for this, including the varying reliability of the mail systems in other countries (Anoka County shared a story with us of a ballot, that despite their best efforts, they were unable to deliver due to a postal strike in Uruguay), it should be acknowledged that if voters are assuming that the ability to request a ballot online also indicates that there is an online option for returning this ballot, they may not plan adequate time to return their ballot to ensure that it is counted. A secure system for electronic ballot return would address both of these problems. This is no small concern. The

2012 UOCAVA Report from the EAC found that the most common reason ballots were rejected was late arrival. This was the primary reason for rejection for 40.4% of rejected ballots.<sup>11</sup> Any method that speeds up the return process and limits the possibility of late arrival has the potential to greatly reduce the rejection of ballots that may have otherwise been accepted if not for their late arrival.

### Comparing Minnesota's Results to Other States

Although our recommendations are directed toward Minnesota and based on the current structure, statutes, and procedures that exist in the state, in order to gain the full benefits of the implications of this information, interstate comparisons should be made. Having a centralized system that can be accessed on the county level in order to upload, track, and report information is key to the success Minnesota has seen in its facilitation of and reporting on UOCAVA processes. The responses received from local elections administrators praised SVRS and explicitly stated this system made their job easier to conduct. Most aspects of the voting process can be administered through this software, helping officials conduct their jobs with little error. Further insight into the benefits of this process can be gleaned through comparisons to states with decentralized systems. Such comparisons would also be helpful to those decentralized states that are considering systems such as the one in Minnesota. Likewise, there are things that Minnesota could seek to gain from other states.

Given the variation in elections administration procedures across state, results of the UOCAVA voting procedures and administration in Minnesota may not be fully applicable to other states.

The methodology of this research project should be replicated in other states to get a better sense

---

<sup>11</sup> US Election Assistance Commission. *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act*. July 2013. Accessed May 3, 2014. [http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Documents/508compliant\\_Main\\_91\\_p.pdf](http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Documents/508compliant_Main_91_p.pdf)

of how UOCAVA voters throughout the country interact with the process. This research project should be expanded to other jurisdictions in order to gain a better understanding of the UOCAVA voting process around the country. Only then will best practices concerning UOCAVA truly be determined.

## **Conclusion**

Although UOCAVA voters make up only a small percentage of each county's total voting population for any given election, they present a set of unique challenges to elections administrators. Our research found that a strong centralized state system of tracking and reporting ballots for these voters is a key piece of technology needed to facilitate the UOCAVA voting process, secure the most accurate data possible, and identify any potential barriers that are occurring for these voters. Handling this process requires a unique combination of both personal and technical skills. To assure that these are present, elections administrators should continue to focus on their job as a form of customer service, in which voters are their customers.

Because of the challenges presented in administering UOCAVA ballots, the data collection process should gather as much relevant data as possible. Because of this, options should be explored in Minnesota (and other states) to allow for the reporting of multiple rejection reasons for a single ballot. This would allow federal officials the chance to correctly quantify the prevalence with which specific issues are occurring so that they can best address them and better serve our citizens who are living or serving overseas. Further diversification of training options and clearer information sharing structures for counties would also help to improve this process.

In order to best ascertain what elections administration procedures best support a strong administration of the UOCAVA process, studies such as this one should be expanded to include other states, both those with strong centralized systems as well as those who have maintained a level of decentralization. These comparisons would shed further light on this information and help federal elections officials define best practices for all states that if implemented can help to ensure that every eligible overseas voter is able to have their ballot cast and counted, with as few problems possible.

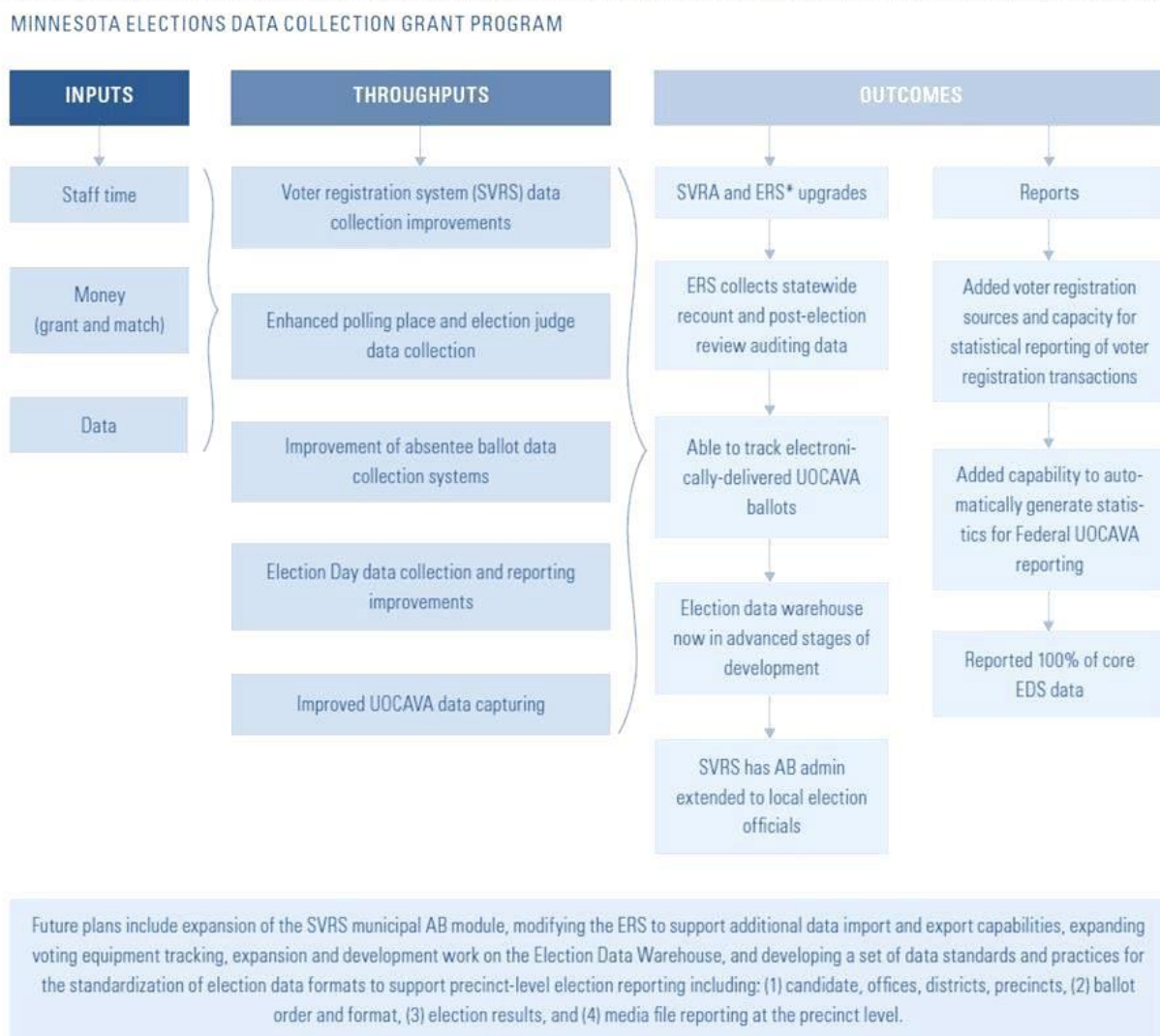
## Appendix A: UOCAVA Ballot Statistics

	<b>UOCAVA Transmissions</b>	<b>UOCAVA Returns</b>	<b>UOCAVA Rejections</b>	<b>% Voters Using UOCAVA</b>	<b>% UOCAVA Ballots Returned</b>	<b>% UOCAVA Returns Rejected</b>
United States	876,362	606,425	33,762	0.57%	69.2%	5.57%
Minnesota	13,642	11,377	871	0.44%	83.4%	7.66%
Hennepin	4,229	3,561	281	0.62%	84.2%	7.89%
Ramsey	1,847	1,592	170	0.66%	86.2%	10.68%
Washington	665	555	32	0.44%	83.5%	5.77%
Anoka	611	494	39	0.31%	80.9%	7.89%
St. Louis	501	412	36	0.41%	82.2%	8.74%
Olmsted	384	314	28	0.45%	81.8%	8.92%
Blue Earth	133	105	2	0.35%	78.9%	1.90%
Clay	104	78	7	0.33%	75.0%	8.97%
Lyon	44	30	0	0.32%	68.2%	0.00%
Marshall	21	19	4	0.42%	90.5%	21.05%
Stevens	13	11	0	0.21%	84.6%	0.00%

Sources: MN Office of Secretary of State; US Census

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/socdemo/voting/publications/p20/2012/tables.html>

## Appendix B: Logic Model for Minnesota's 2008 EAC Elections Data Collection Grant



\* Election Reporting System

Source: US Election Assistance Commission

[illegible]



## **Appendix D: County Official Interview Questions**

1. How many full time employees are in your office? Part time permanent employees? Part time temporary employees (in both odd and even elections years)?
2. Do these employees work only in elections or do they share their duties with other county responsibilities?
3. What type(s) of technology do you use for elections management? Do you have any other systems besides the state run SVRS?
4. How satisfied are you with the technology you use?
  - a. Would you change anything about it if you could?
  - b. Does it present any challenges to you and/or your staff?
5. Are you satisfied with the level of input you have into how the states designs and adjusts SVRS? Are the methods of providing this input clear and easy to access?
6. Briefly walk us through the steps and procedures of processing UOCAVA ballots.
  - a. Are certain parts of the process easier/more challenging than others?
  - b. Are there any changes you would recommend to the process?
7. How do you record/track information on UOCAVA ballots as they are sent out from/arrive to your office? Have you made any adjustments to this process since its initial implementation?
  - a. Does this information need to be reformatted or prepared in any way before being entered?
  - b. How satisfied are you with these tracking procedures?
  - c. Do you feel the reported information accurately reflects what state/federal elections officials and policy makers need to know about UOCAVA? If not, what would you change?
8. How long have current employees been working with UOCAVA ballots?
9. What type of training does staff receive generally? Do you create any of your own training materials?
  - a. Is there specific training for UOCAVA ballots?
10. Do you or your staff find that you have a lot of personal contact with UOCAVA voters?
11. What challenges, if any, do UOCAVA ballots present your staff with?
12. Has any employee in your office worked with these types of ballots during the 2008 election or earlier? If so, how has the process changed since then and how do you feel about those changes?

13. Do you share information about your processes with other counties? If so, is this informally, through formal structures, or both?
14. What would you like to share about your county's UOCAVA process with other counties?
15. What would you like to learn from other counties about their UOCAVA process?
16. Is there anything else you think we should know about this process?

## **Appendix E: State Official Interview Questions**

1. Tell us a little bit about the history of the Statewide Voter Registration System and how it was developed.
  - a. When was the absentee module added?
  - b. When were the UOCAVA portions added?
  - c. Are counties required to use SVRS?
2. How are counties trained on SVRS and reporting?
3. Was SVRS developed in house by the state?
4. What is the input process for counties in the system maintenance and enhancement process?
  - a. Have there been situations over the years where you've solicited feedback from the counties?
5. When it comes to items like UOCAVA, what is the involvement of the federal government with the state's work apart from receiving reports?
6. What different labels for rejection exist in SVRS for absentee ballots?
  - a. Are these categories mandated or decided upon by the state?
7. Is the method of processing these ballots fairly automated at all steps?
8. What have you found to be the biggest benefits of having a centralized system?
9. What challenges come with having a centralized system?
  - a. How do you address these challenges?
10. Did you have to adjust the system when you added the ability to request UOCAVA ballots online?
  - a. Did this require separate training for the counties?
  - b. Are these trainings mandatory for every county?
11. Officials' levels of experience can vary from county to county. Are there any structures in place that allow counties to share information with one another?
  - a. If so, are they formal or informal?
12. Who paid for the costs associated with the county use of SVRS?
13. Do you anticipate any challenges with the absence of HAVA funds?
14. Are there any capacity issues with a centralized system?
  - a. Have you ever had any long term outage of the system?
15. Is most of the technology troubleshooting handled here in house?

16. Would you recommend this type of system to states that currently rely on a decentralized process?
17. Is there anything else you think we should know about the system and how it's used?